

# New video shows Los Angeles Police Department officers kill 56-year-old man in jail

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A graphic video published Thursday on the non-profit news site ProPublica shows multiple Los Angeles Police Department officers, including an African American, at least one Latino, and an Asian female, murdering Vachel Howard, a 56-year-old black man in jail for driving under the influence.

Howard supported himself restoring old cars and working with his father's lawn service. He was highly involved with his seven grandchildren.

Even though he had off-and-on drug problems, Howard had no history of violence. He was arrested the afternoon of June 4, 2012, taken to the jail and strip searched. Although he had no history of mental illness, he was clearly having severe emotional problems. Two video cameras in the 77th Street Division Jail, located in the heart of working-class Los Angeles capture most of the incident. There is no audio recording.

Howard seems calm and cooperative while being seated on and then handcuffed to a jail bench. He becomes agitated, however, and two male officers, Richard Fox and Juan Romero, remove the handcuff while the female officer, Maryann Bunag, menacingly holds a Taser. They walk off camera to take Howard to see a nurse. Howard and the officers are off camera for about 90 seconds.

When they reappear, Fox, Romero and a third male officer are wrestling Howard to the floor while Bunag is shocking him with the Taser. The electrical weapon's computer chip recorded six pulsing electrical discharges, each programmed to last five seconds. For four minutes, six officers pile on Howard, handcuffing his hands and tying his feet. Romero puts his arm around Howard's neck, applying the same chokehold that would kill Eric Garner in Staten Island two years

later.

After the chokehold, Officer Fox, who stands 6'3" and weighs 230 pounds, jams his knee into Howard's back and presses him to the floor for about a minute.

The officers eventually stand up, leaving Howard motionless. They smile and joke with each other while a nurse checks him with a stethoscope. After four minutes of downtime, the nurse begins CPR while Howard is still in handcuffs. Officers eventually take over and remove the restraints, but emergency medical personnel do not arrive until 13 minutes after Howard became unresponsive. The paramedics work on Howard for eight more minutes before wheeling him to an ambulance. He was pronounced dead at the emergency room.

Howard's autopsy disclosed that Romero's chokehold crushed the organs in the front of his neck. According to the Los Angeles County medical examiner, fractures to the larynx and hyoid bone caused blood to fill Howard's windpipe. With the weight of the officers further restricting his breathing, Howard asphyxiated.

The five-member Board of Police Commissioners, dominated by stooges appointed by local Democrats, reviewed the Howard case, and determined that only Romero's chokehold amounted to a violation of LAPD policy. The only consequence for any of the officers was a slap-on-the-wrist 22-day suspension for Romero.

The WSWs spoke with V. James DeSimone, lead counsel for Howard's family, who negotiated a \$2.85 million settlement with the city last October.

"The officers knew Mr. Howard had already been strip searched and posed no threat. There are no guns allowed in the jail. When Officer Romero applied the

lethal chokehold, Howard was already on the floor with five other officers on top of him. It's out of policy, it's unlawful, and in this case it's murder," DeSimone told the WWS.

"Everyone describes Howard as a very lovable, peaceful man. He presided over the family barbeques, and was the one who made sure all the family members got along with each other. He coached baseball for his grandchildren. He had no history of violent or aggressive conduct. This was a man who was loved by his family and neighborhood," DeSimone added.

When asked what lessons should be drawn, DeSimone responded, "The LAPD believes that their officers lives matter more than those of the public that they are hired to protect and serve. In this case even when their lives weren't threatened, they used the potentially lethal chokehold instead of getting Mr. Howard the help he needed."

At the time of Howard's death, there was no systemic collection of data on law enforcement killings. Since May 1, 2013, a private web site, [killedbypolice.net](http://killedbypolice.net), has published a list from media reports, accounting for 3,841 police killings. There is still no systematic tracking of other forms of police violence, such as non-lethal uses of Tasers or chokeholds.

While black males such as Howard are disproportionately victims of police violence, the greatest numbers of those killed by police are white. Their common denominator is not race but class with almost all victims being working class.



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